



BOARD OF DIRECTORS

CHAIRPERSON:

Matthew C. Reale

Attorney, Anthony & Reale

Sandra Carmichael

Community Leader

Rosinne Chlala

The Festivities Foundation

Donna Craft

Community Leader

Pamela J. Dale, Esq.

Law Office of Pamela Dale, L.L.C.

Sofia De Carvalho

M&T Bank

Jill Fitzburgh

Community Leader

Nicholas Kapoor

Fairfield University

Michael E. Lyngaas

Community Leader

Gary MacNamara

Sacred Heart University

Sarah Cwikla Mastropole

Stantec

Kristin Okesson

Connoisseur Media

Reuel Parks

C.H.A.M.P., Inc.

Scott Redfern

IBM

Rev. Sara Smith, Esq.

United Congregational Church

Lisa M. Todd

Webster Bank

Diane Winston

Winston Strategic Partners, LLC

Josh Zabin

Community Leader

CFJ BOARD FELLOWS:

Emily Carveth

Central Hospital for Veterinary Medicine

Sarah Meyerderks

Catholic Charities of Fairfield County

Martha Owens

Recovery Network of Programs

Destiny Sammut

Silver Hill Hospital

Antoinette S. Stephens

Alliance For Community Empowerment

PRESIDENT, CEO:



Testimony Supporting

SB 1086, An Act Concerning Coerced Debt

Banking Committee

February 28, 2023

Good afternoon, Senator Miller, Representative Doucette, Senator Berthel, Representative Delnicki, and members of the committee. The Center for Family Justice provides life-saving services to victims of domestic violence in Bridgeport, Stratford, Fairfield, Trumbull, Monroe and Easton. We provide life-saving services to victims of domestic violence, sexual violence and child abuse. Services include 24/7 crisis support, counseling, support groups, safety planning, shelter, court-based advocacy, legal assistance, forensic interviews in child sexual assault cases, clinical services for child victims of sexual assault, transportation, assistance with securing basic needs and job training, and coordination with local law enforcement, among others. We are a member organization of the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV).

We urge your support of Senate Bill 1086, which provides simple solutions for coerced debt, a form of economic abuse that acts as a powerful control tactic to keep victims of domestic violence tied to their abuser.

A growing body of national research confirms that almost every survivor of domestic violence has experienced economic abuse. Economic abuse takes many forms, all of which can be categorized into three main ideas: preventing resource use (e.g., preventing access to family income or assets), preventing resource acquisition (e.g., preventing employment or education), and exploiting a partners' resources (e.g., coerced debt). Coerced debt can also take many forms. It can involve forcing a partner to file fraudulent legal financial documents or overspend on credit cards. An abusive partner may incur debt without the survivor's consent or coerce a survivor into incurring debt through threats of harm. The debt and poor credit score resulting from economic abuse can have long-term consequences for survivors, creating barriers to education, housing, and employment.

Hope Starts Here





BOARD OF DIRECTORS

CHAIRPERSON:

Matthew C. Reale

Attorney, Anthony & Reale

Sandra Carmichael

Community Leader

Rosinne Chlala

The Festivities Foundation

Donna Craft

Community Leader

Pamela J. Dale, Esq.

Law Office of Pamela Dale, L.L.C.

Sofia De Carvalho

M&T Bank

Jill Fitzburgh

Community Leader

Nicholas Kapoor

Fairfield University

Michael E. Lyngaas

Community Leader

Gary MacNamara

Sacred Heart University

Sarah Cwikla Mastropole

Stantec

Kristin Okesson

Connoisseur Media

Reuel Parks

C.H.A.M.P., Inc.

Scott Redfern

IBM

Rev. Sara Smith, Esq.

United Congregational Church

Lisa M. Todd

Webster Bank

Diane Winston

Winston Strategic Partners, LLC

Josh Zabin

Community Leader

CFJ BOARD FELLOWS:

Emily Carveth

Central Hospital for Veterinary Medicine

Sarah Meyerdierks

Catholic Charities of Fairfield County

Martha Owens

Recovery Network of Programs

Destiny Sammut

Silver Hill Hospital

Antoinette S. Stephens

Alliance For Community Empowerment

PRESIDENT, CEO:



I would like to share a real-life example of how detrimental coerced debt can be to a victim of domestic violence attempting to leave an abusive relationship. Our client's abuser, her husband, told her he was collecting money from their tenants to pay for housing expenses such as electric, water and the mortgage. After our client received a restraining order and the abuser was removed from the house, she discovered that the abuser had not in fact used the collected money to pay those bills and they now owed thousands of dollars to these providers. Our client, who has very little access to financial resources, had to set up payment plans for the utilities and recently received a foreclosure notice for her home. The abuser has yet to contribute any money to offset the debts he incurred in our client's name.

To build the financial security necessary for long-term safety, survivors need support in both safeguarding their finances and recovering from the financial devastation of economic abuse. Senate Bill 1086 would play an important role in helping survivors attain economic security by providing them with critical consumer protections. It provides survivors with a clear path to have coerced debts removed from their credit reports, protecting their credit worthiness, and allows them to avoid the negative impact of debts that should be the liability of their abuser.

The bill proposes a definition of coerced debt and establishes a clear list of documentation that survivors can present to both consumer collection agencies and credit rating agencies to prove that a debt, or portion of debt, was incurred as a result of duress, intimidation, threat of force, force, fraud, or undue influence. Upon receipt of such documentation, a consumer collection agency would be required to cease collection of the coerced debt from the survivor, but the proposed language makes it clear that the agency is not prevented from pursuing collection of the debt from the individual who is found to have incurred the debt (e.g., the abuser). The bill also requires credit rating agencies, when presented with documentation that a debt is coerced, to reinvestigate that debt, and upon a determination that the debt was coerced, remove any reference to that debt from the survivor's credit report.

At its core, domestic violence is about control. Abusers do not want their victim to leave, and they know just how effective it is to essentially financially drown their victim, leading the victim to feel like they can't survive on their own. Credit ratings that have been tarnished by economic abuse, and coerced debt in particular, result in longer shelter stays, survivors returning to their abuser, or calculating that they can't afford to leave in the first place. Employers, landlords, and utility companies make extensive use of credit histories during screening. Credit abuse is a tactic that

Hope Starts Here





BOARD OF DIRECTORS

CHAIRPERSON:

Matthew C. Reale

Attorney, Anthony & Reale

Sandra Carmichael

Community Leader

Rosinne Chlala

The Festivities Foundation

Donna Craft

Community Leader

Pamela J. Dale, Esq.

Law Office of Pamela Dale, L.L.C.

Sofia De Carvalho

M&T Bank

Jill Fitzburgh

Community Leader

Nicholas Kapoor

Fairfield University

Michael E. Lyngaas

Community Leader

Gary MacNamara

Sacred Heart University

Sarah Cwikla Mastropole

Stantec

Kristin Okesson

Connoisseur Media

Reuel Parks

C.H.A.M.P., Inc.

Scott Redfern

IBM

Rev. Sara Smith, Esq.

United Congregational Church

Lisa M. Todd

Webster Bank

Diane Winston

Winston Strategic Partners, LLC

Josh Zabin

Community Leader

CFJ BOARD FELLOWS:

Emily Carveth

*Central Hospital for Veterinary
Medicine*

Sarah Meyerdericks

Catholic Charities of Fairfield County

Martha Owens

Recovery Network of Programs

Destiny Sammut

Silver Hill Hospital

Antoinette S. Stephens

Alliance For Community Empowerment

PRESIDENT, CEO:



abusers use to maintain control over their victim because they understand that without a job, rental housing, reliable transportation, and basic utilities, it is almost impossible for a survivor to be economically stable, secure, and independent.

The Center for Family Justice serves over 5,000 victims and survivors annually and many report feeling trapped by the years of economic abuse they have experienced. It is critical that we take steps to give survivors the support and resources they need to keep themselves and their children safe. Given the prevalence of economic abuse, that means making relief from coerced debt a part of the safety net. We believe this bill does just that and we urge your support.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Angela Schlingheyde, J.D.

Director of Civil Legal & Court Advocacy Services

The Center for Family Justice

Bridgeport, Stratford, Fairfield, Trumbull, Monroe, and Easton

Hope Starts Here

